

Public Programs

Saturday, February 7, 2009 4-6 PM

*In and Out of the Context of Contemporary Mexico City:
A Symposium on the Work of Melanie Smith*

Harvard University David Rockefeller Center for Latin American
Studies, CGIS Building, Room: S-050/Concourse level
1730 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, MA 02138

This joint presentation of the MIT List Visual Arts Center and
Harvard's Latin American and Latino Art Forum at the David
Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies focuses on the
work of Mexico City-based artist Melanie Smith.

Panelists:

Melanie Smith, artist

Cuahtémoc Medina, curator

Diane E. Davis, Professor of Political Sociology at MIT's
Department of Urban Studies and Planning

Moderator:

James Oles, Professor of Art History at Wellesley College

Respondents:

José Falconi, Fellow/Curator of the Rockefeller Center's Art
Forum exhibitions and special series at Harvard University

Bill Arning, MIT List Visual Arts Center Curator

Gallery Talks

Saturday, February 14, 2 PM

Mark Linga, LVAC Educator

Thursday, February 19, 6PM

Bill Arning, LVAC Curator

Saturday, February 21, 2PM

Bill Arning

Wednesday, March 4, 12:30PM

Jane Farver, LVAC Director

Wednesday, March 11, 12:30PM

Mark Linga

Saturday, March 21, 2PM

Mark Linga

Wednesday, April 1, 12:30 PM

Bill Arning

MIT Public Art Tour

Saturday, March 28, 1PM

Tour departs from LVAC galleries

LVAC Film Nights, organized by John Gianvito

Thursday, February 19, 7:30PM, Bartos Theatre

Life in Loops (A Megacities RMX), directed by Tim Novotny
(Austria, 2006, 80 min.)

Thursday, March 5, 7:30PM, Bartos Theatre

Fake Fruit, directed by Chick Strand (USA, 1986, 22 min.)

La fórmula secreta/ The Secret Formula,
directed by Rubén Gámez (Mexico, 1965, 45 min.)

March 5th's film screening is co-sponsored by the MIT-Mexico
Program

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has been made possible by Jacques and Natasha Gelman Trust,
Oldcastle Foster-Southeastern, the Council for the Arts at MIT,
and the Massachusetts Cultural Council. The exhibition was
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at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, (UNAM).
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MIT List Visual Arts Center
E15, 20 Ames Street
Cambridge, MA 02139
617 253 4680
<http://listart.mit.edu>



Melanie Smith: Spiral City & Other Vicarious Pleasures

MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER

February 6-April 5, 2009

Melanie Smith: *Spiral City & Other Vicarious Pleasures*

After graduating from art school, British-born artist Melanie Smith left England in 1989 to visit Mexico City. Smith intended to stay for six months but never left. Over the course of that time, Smith's artistic exploration of the urban, cultural, and socio-economic realities of the sprawling megalopolis has resulted in a diverse body of work that includes paintings, photography, sculptural installation, and videos. Using colors, textures, materials, and found objects from her immediate urban environment, Smith examines the complex and chaotic visual elements of her adopted home, Mexico City.

A central work in *Spiral City & Other Vicarious Pleasures* is *Spiral City* (2002), created in collaboration with Rafael Ortega. The video features a dynamic aerial view of the city. Shot in a single take, *Spiral City* depicts a seemingly unending accumulation of buildings, streets, factories, parking lots, and markets that compose the largest urban concentration in the hemisphere. The video recalls, both in the work's title and the helicopter cinematography, Robert Smithson's 1970 film of his seminal earthwork *Spiral Jetty*. It also alludes to Smithson's concepts of "entropy" or "energy drain", which describe the way sculpture interacts with the aesthetics of architectural and geological disintegration.

Aerobics Class (1996), an earlier video work, explores the rhythms and patterns of 20th-century life and culture in Mexico City. Several banks of monitors mimic a department store display. The video installation presents the gaudy costumes and unrelenting beats of an aerobics class, extremely popular in the city in the 1990s.

Smith's paintings and photographs reflect her dual interests in urbanism, as reflected by the city grid, and the history of art. *Vanishing Landscapes* (2005-2006), and *Painting for Spiral City* (2004), a series of large-scale paintings, offer haunting views of the city based on black and white photographs. With soft focus receding into a complete loss of detail, these works suggest both straight urban photographic documentation and abstract painting. In the 1990s-the sudden devaluation of the peso and subsequent influx of cheap Chinese-made commercial goods created new

economic and social patterns in the city. Smith was struck by the ubiquitous use of the color orange to encourage consumption and consumerism. In photographic works such as *Tasquena* (1996), *Bodyguards* (1995), *Woman Folding Clothes* (1996), and *Comercial Mexicana* (2002), Smith uses orange to symbolize the commercialization found in the budding global economy of Mexico City. This same reference is also reflected in *Orange Lush I*, (1995) an installation featuring orange plastic found objects arranged sculpturally.

In *Jam Side Up, Jam Side Down* (1992), a series of vinyl objects hangs from a corridor as if they were garments in a wardrobe or carcasses in a butcher shop. The physicality of the pieces suggests a human metaphor with rubber evoking skin. Yet the material is not human, it is sterile plastic, a collection of cheap consumer products. The piece is one of a series Smith made in collaboration with the Belgian-Mexican artist Francis Alÿs. The title is an allusion to toast, served jam side up or jam side down.

The photographic series *Tianguis Aerial* (2003) suggests a layering of economic realities and patterns of color as the multi-colored, temporary structures housing street markets trace geometric patterns between the gray official architecture of the city grid. Seen from the air, the garish red and pink tents are like artificial flowers blooming in the middle of a concrete and asphalt desert. Their presence highlights the contrast between official and unofficial economies and architectural structures. "Tianguis" is the Nahuatl word for a traveling open-air street market, one of many instances of indigenous Mexican languages peppering daily speech in Mexico City.

Farce and Artifice, (2004) is a complex allusion to theatricality and its relationship to the display of art. The leaning of the paintings suggests storage conditions; the lights and artificial trees suggest a stage set. In its totality the work reminds us that cities are theatrical places; stage sets with props and scripts for daily life. Smith also includes photographs found in a flea market and video footage of a staged salsa performance. The found photographs are interesting in their own right as they seem to be taken from performances of

Mexico City experimental theatre groups from the 1970s and '80s.

In *Parres I*, (2004) Smith explores the tension produced by third-world expansion. Shot in the semi-urban settlement of Parres near Mexico City, a lone figure facing the camera slowly spray paints and completely obscures the visual frame. The action can be taken as either an escape to utopia or a hysterical reaction to the complexity of boundaries between the megalopolis and the countryside.

About the Artist

Born in 1965, in Poole, England, Melanie Smith has lived and worked in Mexico City since 1989. Smith's work has recently been exhibited at the Tate Gallery, London, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. She has exhibited with Peter Kilchmann in Zurich, Switzerland; OMR Gallery in Mexico City, Mexico; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, Spain; The Tamayo Museum of Contemporary Art in Mexico City; UCLA Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, California; and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts.

About the Curator

Cuauhtémoc Medina is an art critic, curator, and historian, who lives and works in Mexico City. He holds a PhD in Art History and Theory from the University of Essex, UK, and is a researcher at the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas at the National University of Mexico. Between 2002 and 2008, Medina was the first Associate Curator of Latin American Art Collections at the Tate Modern in London. He recently organized a historical show *The Age of Discrepancy: Art and Culture in Mexico 1968-1997*, in collaboration with Olivier Debrouse, Pilar García and Alvaro Vázquez (shown at MUCA in Mexico City, MALBA in Buenos Aires, and Pinacoteca Do Estado in Sao Paulo). Among his recent publications are: *Francis Alÿs* (Phaidon, 2007), *Melanie Smith: Spiral City & Other Vicarious Pleasures* (México, A&R, 2006) and "The 21st century has just begun'... beyond the poetic and political divide", published in: *Out of the Studio!* (Hasselt, Z33 Art Centre, 2008).